LIKE A CHILD AT HOME
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Psalm 131
Isaiah 49:8–16a
Luke 15:1–7

"Can a woman forget her nursing child?"
Isaiah 49:15 (NRSV)

Righteous God, you rule the nations.
Guard brave men and women who risk themselves in battle for their country.
Give them compassion for their enemies. Keep our sons and daughters from hate that hardens. Though they must be at war, let them live for peace.
Encourage them as they encourage each other, and never let hard duty separate them from loyalty to your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

"A Prayer for Those in the Military"
The Book of Common Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

There is a great moment that happens in my life every week or so, usually on a Saturday morning. The doorbell rings. I say, "Who's there? Who could it possibly be? Who's coming to see me on Saturday morning?" I open the door, and there stands two-year-old Alex, my grandson. His face lights up; he hurls himself at me, arms open wide. I lift him to my cheek, and we hug robustly. And then Alex has second thoughts. He looks over his shoulder to see if his mother is there, if perhaps this is all a ploy to drop him off with grandparents, which feels, to Alex, a lot like desertion, abandonment. When his mother comes through the door and he's certain that he's not forgotten, the hug resumes. Sometimes he opts for her at that point, just to be sure.

It is a great moment, and it was a great moment in the life of God's people when one of their poet-prophets had the audacity and imagination to tell them that the divine-human encounter, the relationship between God and human beings, is a lot like that small intimate moment on Saturday morning. In fact it was a major turning point in their history—and beyond those people, a turning point in the way human beings think about God.

God's people—Israel—were held captive in Babylon for a generation, in exile literally. They prayed and prayed for release; they have sat around singing the old songs about Jerusalem and the temple, about home. The longing for home, the hoping, the praying went on for decades.

And now it's happening. There has been a regime change, and they are going home. At that very moment, one of their poets, a prophet, comes up with an unforgettable image:

> He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
> He will gather the lambs in his bosom.

Words we remember every time we baptize infants.

God has heard the cries of the people for their liberation, their longing for home:

> "I have answered you," God says.
> "I have helped you.
> I will make mountains into a road leading to home."
> Sing for joy, and exult O earth;
> break forth, O mountains, into singing.

The whole creation is celebrating at this joyful homecoming. But at the last moment, like Alex in my arms looking over his shoulder, Israel has second thoughts.

"After all, we've been waiting here for fifty years. The Lord has forsaken and forgotten us, after all."

And then one of the most poignant, but also profound moments in the Bible, a moment when everything changes. God says,

> Can a woman forget her nursing child, . . . the child of her womb?
> Even these may forget,
> Yet I will not forget you.

The ancient world was deeply patriarchal. When people thought about or talked about God, it was in almost exclusively masculine terms: God as father, warrior, king. But here is a new word, a maternal, feminine word, a shocking word, I am sure. God is a woman who can no more forget her nursing child than stop breathing. In fact, the name of the child—Israel, every child, every human being—is inscribed in the palm of God's hand. There's a thought that can get you through a tough day.

And it's not an isolated metaphor. Psalm 131: "My soul is like a weaned child with its mother." The prophet Hosea speaks similarly and beautifully:

> When Israel was a child, I loved him.
> It was I who taught them to walk. . . .
> I took them up in my arms.
> I was to them like those
> who lift infants to their cheeks. . . .
> I bent down to them and fed them.

That is very specifically maternal language. Israel knew that God is beyond human description and comprehension. Israel was so aware of the mystery and unknowingness of God that God didn't even have a name. Metaphor—father, king, warrior—but no name, just a series of consonants. JHWH is the way it is in the Hebrew Bible—unpronounceable, although, of course, we try and say, "Jahweh." But the point is that all language limits God. If you only have masculine metaphors, you're missing something. If you can only call God "Father" because that's what you were taught and you've been doing it all your life, you're missing something very important—namely the sense, the startling good news, that God is a caring, nurturing, welcoming parent/mother/father, who carries the lambs in his bosom, who lifts the lambs in his arms, who loves his/her child like a father running down the road to welcome a prodigal son home or like a mother nursing her infant.

Jesus was no less revolutionary. He reached across the mores and customs and laws of his people and included women in his circle, talked with women in public, ate with women. His favorite word for God was *Abba*, an intimate Aramaic word used in the family circle. The best English equivalent is "Daddy." But the radical point he made was that God is not the remote, angry judge off in some corner of the universe waiting for people to live up to his expectations, waiting to be placated or persuaded by religious ritual and piety to be nice. God is more like a loving parent, a mother or father.

When people complained one time about the company Jesus was keeping —"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them"—Jesus told a series of remarkable stories: about a father who runs down the road to welcome his lost son home, a woman who turns her house upside down until she finds one lost coin, and first about a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to find, recover, and bring back to the safety of home the one who is lost.

I loved Garrison Keillor's Mother's Day column. I used it two weeks ago, but it's worth repeating. "Nobody Loves You Like Your Mama Does" was the title, and it could be a commentary on our text this morning.

> Your father has a hard time remembering your birthday or even your Christian name, but your mother knows you by scent, thanks to years of doing your laundry. She knows when you are in trouble. And you will get into trouble some day. Count on it. Someone will file a lawsuit against you and subpoena your e-mail and it will all come out, your dark secrets, your nefarious dealings, and your friends will cross the street to avoid you and your brothers and sisters will fade into the woodwork, but your mother will still love you. Like an old lioness, she'll come running even if you're 2,000 miles away." (*Chicago Tribune* 8 May 2008)

Mary Tillman, mother of Pat Tillman, the NFL player who enlisted in the Army after 9/11 and who was killed in Afghanistan in 2004, hasn't forgotten her child. The Army said he died a hero, killed by enemy fire. But it didn't quite compute. Mary Tillman pressed for more information. The Army finally admitted that it was friendly fire and apologized. Mary Tillman still wasn't satisfied and did her own investigation, wrote a book in which she remembers that her infant son liked to be held upright, so she held him up in her lap and bounced him on her knee until her arms ached. She wants to know what happened to her son: "Can a woman forget her nursing child? Even if these forget, I will not."

Rosa Trevino, whose daughter Lucy has had spinal muscular atrophy since the age of four and is mostly paralyzed and who graduated from UIC in bioengineering this month, has not forgotten her child.

Rosa was there to get Lucy to campus and carry her backpack, to open doors; she was there during engineering classes and labs and study sessions. Lucy's mother cut her peanut butter sandwiches into bite-sized squares, held juice to her mouth and her cell phone to her ear, zipped her coat and dabbed her nose her entire life, and for the last six years, five days a week on two CTA trains to UIC and home, laid homework out and turned pages in the textbooks. And she was there when Lucy graduated two weeks ago.

A reporter asked Lucy about the challenges of college and she responded, "In college you have such a crazy schedule. You stay after to study with other students. You need to talk to a professor. I was like, 'Oh, my gosh, how am I going to find someone who's going to put up with all of that?' My Mom was like, 'Well, I guess I'll go with you'" (*Chicago Tribune*, 11 May 2008).

It was a great moment when a prophet of Israel reminded the people of God that their God was like a loving, caring, fiercely nurturing mother who cannot and will not forget her nursing child.

It’s one of the reasons there is a church—to remember and express and act out that parental love God has for every child of God, that fierce will of God that every child be as safe and secure and at peace as an infant in a mother’s arms.

It’s one of the reasons why this church continues to invest itself in outreach programs like Tutoring, which is a small but important way to provide affirmation and safety and security and a bit of home to children who are very much at risk—not just from poverty, but in Chicago at risk of being shot and killed. Twenty-one of them have been. By April 28, twenty-one Chicago Public School children had died this year of gunshot wounds. Perhaps you saw the picture of De’Jour Stewart on the front page of that day’s paper. He’s one of our Tutoring students. He’s eleven years old, lives in Cabrini-Green, and one day walking to soccer practice was caught in gang crossfire. He dove for cover and was unharmed, but he did see a man killed in front of his eyes. “I used to be happy,” De’Jour said, “but I don’t think the world is safe for me.”’

Scientists are discovering that when children witness something like that and they live in constant fear, there are neurophysiologic changes in the brain that cause anxiety, depression, learning disabilities. Urban violence is now, the scientists are saying, a public health issue. Children are not meant to live like that, and yet we have not figured out how nor mustered the political courage and will to get guns out of the hands of children. That—weapons of any kind, particularly semiautomatic guns—in the hands of children and adolescents is not a Second Amendment issue but an issue of decency and care and nurture and love for the children, all of them.

Our Tutoring program works. Stephan Hall is one of our students who graduated in 2006. Because of the Chicago Lights Tutoring and Scholarship Program here at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Stephen was able to attend Providence St. Mel High School and Morehouse College. He’s going to spend this summer in New York City as an intern with Goldman Sachs. “This program changed my life,” Stephen said.

The reason we are here is to remind people that they are not forgotten, forsaken, by God or by us, that there is one whose arms are open and on the palm of whose hand every name is inscribed.

When he was critically ill, the late John Carmody wrote a book, *Psalms for Times of Trouble*. “The child comes to me crying,” he wrote. “Holding out his arms to be lifted up. How often I come to you that way, though I don’t even realize it. I feel like an orphan—out on my own, alone.”

It was a great moment when a prophet told the people that God is like a loving parent, a caring father, a mother nursing her child, and that their names, every one of them, were inscribed on the palm of God's hand.

Frederick Buechner says we all dream of home, a place of peace and charity and safety. "The word *home* summons up a place where you feel, or did once feel, uniquely at home, which is to say, a place which in some sense belongs to you, a place where you feel that all is somehow ultimately well even if things are not going all that well" (*The Longing for Home*, pp. 139–140). If we are lucky we had a home like that. But even if not, he says, "it is that same peace and charity [and safety] we dream of finding once again in the home that the tide of time draws us toward—our final home."

And the good news is that our home—the home we dream of and toward which time draws us—is the embrace of God, the loving arms of God, the safety and security and peace of God's love in Jesus Christ.

On Memorial Day we remember all those who died in the service of our country, far from home: France, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Italy, Saipan, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan—far from family and loved ones and home and yet, by faith, safe in the arms of God, each name inscribed on the palm of God's hand.

I remember today my mother's youngest brother, John Calvin McCormick, for whom I am named. I have told this story before, but I'm thinking about him particularly today. I keep his picture on my desk to remember him. He was a Marine and he died on Saipan in June of 1944. He was twenty-four years old. I was six. Nearly fifty years later, I was in Hawaii visiting Presbyterian Military Chaplains on behalf of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). My host, a Navy chaplain, took us to see the Punchbowl National Military Cemetery, where many of the casualties of the war in the South Pacific are buried. I told him about my uncle. I didn't know where he was buried; Saipan, I assumed. So we went to the office, looked up the records, and there he was, PFC John C. McCormick, Pennsylvania, my Uncle Jack. We visited the grave. No one from his family had ever been there. If they knew where he was, I don't remember being told. And so for me it was somehow an experience of home, a kind of homecoming. Finally someone from his family, his home, had found him.

And it reminded me that he was not forgotten or forsaken. His name is inscribed not just on that small, modest granite marker in a military cemetery in Honolulu, but on the very palm of God's hand.

He—all of them, all of us—like a child at home.